

Sustained Silent Reading and Young Adult Short Stories for High School Classes

Terry L. Jensen and Valarie S. Jensen

K—What We KNOW.

The Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading program (USSR) was first proposed by Lyman Hunt at the University of Vermont in the 1960's, and by the 1970's it was being implemented in the public schools system. Four decades later one can find it referenced by many different names: High Intensity Practice (HIP), Motivation in Middle Schools (MIMS), Free Voluntary Reading (FVR), Positive Outcomes While Enjoying Reading (POWER), Drop Everything and Read (DEAR), but perhaps the most commonly used name is Sustained Silent Reading (SSR).

The basic premise of allowing SSR time is that students who read often will read better. Classrooms should allow every possible opportunity for this activity to take place. As Pilgreen states in *The SSR Handbook: How to Organize and Manage a Sustained Silent Reading Program*, "If students are to be fully proficient readers, . . . they eventually need to break away from the scaffolding activities that support

them in their roles as emergent readers and begin to read some materials independently" (in Anderson 1). Since its introduction, SSR has been implemented at all grade levels and according to research has been highly effective in the improvement of reading skills and the acquisition of vocabulary, not to mention the development of a positive attitude in students toward reading.

In their article "Evaluating Sustained Silent Reading in the Reading Classes," Chow and Chou list what they call "Key Elements to Successful SSR" (Chow 3). Some are that: (1) The teacher must be a role model—not just to model silent reading, but to model the enjoyment of reading as well; (2) SSR must be a long-term project—SSR appears most effective if used over a period of at least 6 months; (3) Materials must be available on a wide range of topics and readability—the importance of a wide variety is to ensure that each student will find a book that will be of interest to him/her; and (4) SSR must involve ownership and communities of readers—students need to be able to feel ownership of the reading material (Chow 3-4).

It was with these key elements in mind that we, as high school language arts teachers, convinced our faculty to implement a version of SSR, the DEAR program, throughout our school. On Thursdays at the appointed moment all activity stops, and everyone throughout the school picks up a book,

and all read. To extend this activity, the Language Arts teachers conduct SSR in their individual classes on Fridays. However, the implementation was not without snags. One major problem occurred in the school library. Students, who were unaccustomed to having a "reading" book in their possession, would make a quick trip to the library between classes. They would grab a book from the shelf, so they would have one on hand for the DEAR period and SSR. Then, when the moment passed, they would return the book to the library, overloading the staff at the circulation desk. Obviously, the students

weren't reading the books over long periods. Rather, they were just looking for something to fill the time. The library staff threatened mutiny. We suggested that reading material be provided that was more suited to the time allotted, and, in an effort to bring peace, the language arts department filed for and was awarded a grant, so that each language arts teacher could purchase a class

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The majority of the students who failed to bring a pre-selected book to class were the reluctant readers. The teachers needed a selection of books that would catch the reluctant readers' attention and hook them on reading. A wide variety of topics and readability was needed. The solution appeared to be young adult short story anthologies.

W—What we WANTED to Know

Young adult short story anthologies would allow for a wide range of topics and readability levels for the least amount of money, but would they hook the reluctant reader and help make SSR a success? We gathered a collection of short story anthologies (See Appendix A) and made it available in the classroom. Those students who failed to bring a book to class were required to select a book from the classroom collection. At the end of the SSR period the student was then required to complete a "short story evaluation form" (Appendix B), regarding the reading experience for that period. At first, two team-taught ninth grade English classes with a large population of mainstreamed resource students were selected to participate. Then the same DEAR program expectation was extended to the two ninth grade honors classes and the two regular ninth grade English classes.

L—What we LEARNED

What the Honors Students Taught Us

In order to get feedback from the honor students, we had to solicit volunteers. Honor students rarely “forgot” to bring a reading book to class. The volunteers gladly filled out the evaluation form, and most of their comments extended to the back of the form. With few exceptions, the honor students finished the reading of the short story in the appointed time period and stated that they would go back and finish the story, had they not been able to finish it during the period. However, if given the choice to read a novel or a short story during the reading time, the majority of honor students stated they would rather read a novel during the SSR period than a short story. Many of them stated they liked the long-term commitment of a novel.

“I generally read novels because if it’s a good book I want it to go on” (Emma).

“I enjoy being immersed in a world that can only be in a novel. Short stories are just too short” (Parley).

“I would rather read a novel so I can have something to come back to read” (William).

“I really enjoy stories that have a lot of development and things happen. I also like long books. To me they are more interesting” (Brigham).

Paul, another honor student, checked that he would rather read short stories during SSR. He stated that short stories are, “more interesting, a book is long, and you read for long periods of time, a short story, you can usually finish.”

What the Regular and Team-Taught Ninth Graders Taught Us

In the hopes of inspiring some to be more responsible and bring self-selected books, the rule became that if one did not bring a book to class for reading, he / she was required to select from the short story collection available. It was a small struggle in the beginning, but attitudes changed. These students filled out the form with short answers, but the majority of them completed the short story during SSR. Most who did not finish stated they would go back to complete the story. Some were not enjoying the story they were reading and stated they would rather pick a different story to finish. Most stated that they would rather read a short story over a novel during SSR. All seemed to have a different reason for it:

“I like to read short stories during this time because it’s something you can finish” (Samuel).

“I like to read short stories because they are short and you can read them fast so you don’t get board [sic] with them” (Wilford).

“I get more than one story that way. I can enjoy the difference in all of them” (Lucy).

“I like them because they are funny” (David).

“Because I could finish a story in about 30 minutes and I will not forget parts of the story” (Oscar).

The vote was split on whether the short story would lead them to reading a novel by the same author. Many were just not interested in reading a longer work, and would not like to read a novel during SSR or any other time. These students seem to think that reading is drudgery, and the commitment required to read a longer work is overwhelming to them. The commitment, up to this point, has been a deterrent to their reading and, therefore, has interfered with the progress these students could have made in this area. By introducing them to the idea of using a short story during SSR, teachers have opened a door for these students, and the possibilities for growth have been greatly increased.

What the Faculty Members Teachers Observed

Once students adjusted to the program, the reluctant readers seemed to gain some success from SSR. The students, who usually had been caught just staring off into space during reading time, actually read and completed a short story. The real success was that they enjoyed it. Students, who at one time would ask if they could work on homework from another class during SSR, now asked to borrow a short story collection, knowing that they can find something they might enjoy and be able to finish it. The whining from students and teachers was greatly diminished, as both were experiencing more success and enjoyment in SSR. The teachers who were involved in this pilot program felt very excited about SSR and its possibilities, and they discovered that a collection of short story anthologies in the classroom proved to be a great way to motivate reluctant readers. Most of the teachers indicated that they would continue to expand the young adult short story libraries within their classrooms, as well as adding enriching magazines, so that students could continue to experience success in their reading, as well as growth and progress in their skills and strategies as readers. Ultimately, we believe that young adults who enjoy reading will become adults who enjoy reading, and that adults who enjoy reading will be lifetime learners, thus creating a more literate society.

APPENDIX A: Bibliography of Young Adult Short Stories Used in the Project

- Cormier, Robert. *8 plus 1*. New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell, 1980.
- Cart, Michael. (Ed.) *Tomorrowland: Stories about the Future*. New York: Scholastic, 1999.
- Duncan, Lois (Ed.). *On The Edge: Stories at the Brink*. New York: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2000.
- Fraustino, Lisa Rowe (Ed.). *Dirty Laundry: Stories about Family Secrets*. New York: Viking, 1998.
- Gallo, Donald R. (Ed.). *Connections*. New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell, 1989.
- Gallo, Donald R. (Ed.). *No Easy Answers*. New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell, 1997.
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- Gold, Robert S. *Points of Departure*. New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell, 1967.
- Konigsburg, E.L. *Throwing Shadows*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1979.

Mazer, Harry. *Twelve Shots*. Bantam Doubleday Dell, 1997.
 Nixon, Joan Lowery. *Ghost Town: Seven Ghostly Stories*.
 New York: Delacorte, 2000.
 Stearns, Michael. *A Nightmare's Dozen*. Bantam Doubleday
 Dell, 1996.

APPENDIX B: Short Story Evaluation

Student Name _____ Class Period _____

Title of Book _____

Title of Short Story _____

Author of Short Story _____

1. Were you able to completely read the short story you selected during the sustained silent reading time?

Yes No

2. If you were unable to finish the reading, will you come back to this story and finish it at a later date?

Yes No

3. Is this a story you would recommend to others?

Yes No

Why? _____

4. During sustained silent reading time from which type of book would you rather read?

Novel Collection of Short Stories Other

Please explain (Write on back for more space)

5. Now that you have read a short story by this author, would you be interested in reading a novel by this same author?

Yes No

Please explain (Write on back for more space)

Works Cited

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Terry Jensen earned his BA in English Education from Brigham Young University in 1988 and began teaching in secondary education in a residential treatment center. He is currently teaching 11th and 12th grade students in the alternative high school in the Jordan School District in Sandy, Utah.

Valarie Jensen earned her BA in Humanities Education from Brigham Young University in 1985. She taught English and Humanities to 11th and 12th grade students in a private school for one year and then a residential treatment center until 1991, at which time she began teaching in the Alpine School District in American Fork, Utah. She is currently teaching ninth grade English.